

TRAINING METHODS AT THE ALMORA CENTRE

Narendra Sharma

India has produced quite a few dancers during this century who have been brilliant performers and reputed teachers or gurus and have their due place in history. Since we have no written record specially of their achievements, they have become legends. Most of them worked within the framework of the tradition and tried to enrich it by contributing their individual touch within that framework. The emergence of Uday Shankar on the Indian dance scene was unique. He was not only a brilliant performer and choreographer but also a remarkable teacher or guru. He gave a completely new turn and concept to the teaching methods for young dancers and choreographers. Unlike others, he never taught single complete dances to his students, not even what he used to perform but he made his students capable of creating hundreds of dances on their own. His approach uprooted all known methods of teaching which were grounded and carried on with blind faith in tradition and without the spirit of enquiry.

Out of Shankar's approach emerged a movement vaguely called Indian Ballet and a team of choreographers to carry on its work. Thus Uday Shankar's task though left incomplete, is most significant in the history of dance specially since his approach on the one side, enabled one to recreate the tradition and on the other, to break it and find new ways of expression.

The Indian 'Ballet' movement has come to stay presently with a place for modern choreography and it is important now to discuss Uday Shankar as a teacher and assess his methods of training.

Interest in Teaching

It is a fact known to only a few that the teacher in Uday Shankar was born during his periodic stays in the famous institute, Dartington Hall in Devon, during the early 30's. Uday Shankar led a busy life with hectic tour programmes from 1920 to 1938 specially in Europe and America. These

were interspersed with visits to India and eastern countries. He had formed his own troupe and this was his peak period as performer and choreographer. His troupe used to break tours in between and stay at Dartington Hall to prepare and rehearse new items for the coming tours. The period used to give them some rest but by the end of the 30's they felt the strain of such constant tours and began thinking in terms of settling at one place to train new dancers.

The institute of Dartington Hall was founded in 1925 by its Trustees in rural surroundings with an idea of imparting education in a natural setting. Apart from experiments in general education, it was a centre where eminent artists worked with students on planned courses. The trustees of the Hall invited a number of top artists for this purpose. They were attracted by the atmosphere of the place and readily agreed to work. A Department of Arts was opened by the Hall and personalities of the eminence of Kurt Jooss, the creator of famous ballet "The Green Table" and Michael Chekhov, the theatre-director held Courses. Rudolf Laban, the creator of the notation for dance also worked periodically at the Hall. It was at this time that Uday Shankar and his troupe visited the place.

The idea of starting an institute for training young dancers came to Uday Shankar and the Trustees of Dartington Hall at that time. It is significant to note that both were keen to start such an institute in India and not in the West. At the initiative of Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Elmhirst of Dartington Hall and of Miss Beatrice Straight of New York, Uday Shankar was given a grant of about five lakhs of rupees to start a Centre. He came to India along with some Trustees and selected Almora as a location for the institute. The U.P. Government gave 94 acres of land at Sintola, a hill near Almora. The Centre started functioning from 1939 and the first batch of students came in 1940; I was one of them.

The Almora Centre

It was at the Centre that Uday Shankar was at his peak as teacher and choreographer. It was here that he gave shape to his style and evolved his own training system. It is important to know what influences helped him to develop these training methods.

Shankar was very greatly influenced by the classes of Michael Chekhov at Dartington Hall. Nephew of the famous play-write Anton Chekhov, Michael was a product of the Moscow Art Theatre. Inspired by the Stanislavsky system, Michael believed in movement before speech for an actor's training. Rhythm for him was the secret of any significant drama. He used to take classes of the simple walk with variations of rhythm and character. His course included exercises for training in concentration and imagination in creative work; speech; body as the instrument of the dramatic artist;

eurhythmics; improvisation and finally your own production. In addition to this there were lectures on history, development of the theatre and play-writing. In the end his students appeared for performances before a selected public, before graduating to the professional stage.

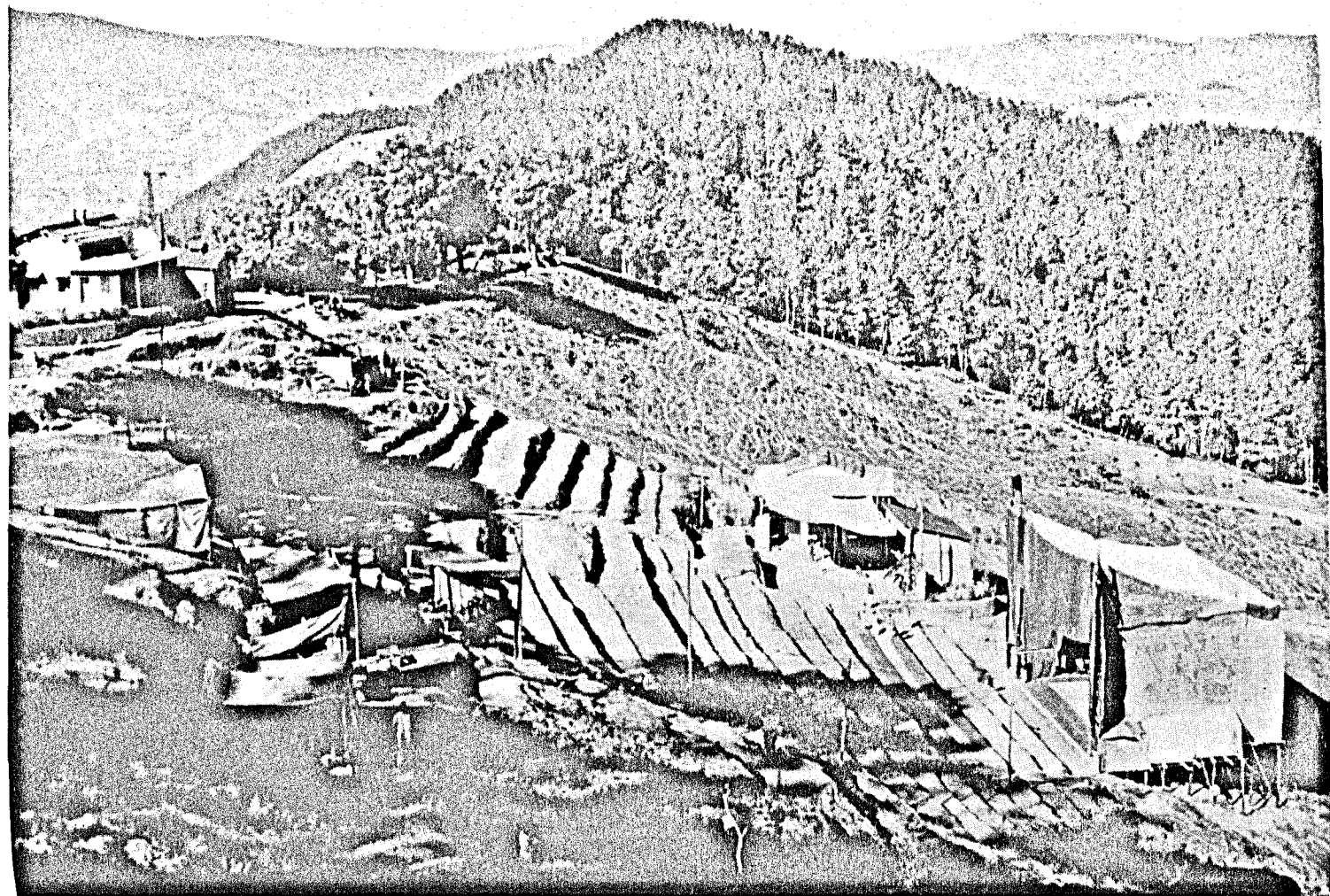
Uday Shankar watched Chekhov's classes and was very fascinated by his methods. They became good friends and there was a lot of give and take of ideas between them as teachers. Uday Shankar, like Chekhov, was much influenced by Dr. Rudolf Steiner's method of training. It was here that Uday Shankar deeply realized the training of the inner world of a dancer along with the discovery of body movement. With this idea in mind he planned a course for his students at Almora. It is significant that before this period, although active in performance and rehearsing his items for that purpose, Uday Shankar never had any system of training for his dancers. They just rehearsed his programme items. If on one hand he was influenced by Michael Chekhov's intellectual training, on the other he was deeply influenced by the Indian tradition. The strongest influence here came from Guru Shankaran Namboodri, one of the top exponents of *Kathakali*. It was he alone that Uday Shankar considered his guru, and therefore the greatest influence on his own style came from *Kathakali*. By then Uday Shankar had extensively toured India and had seen the best of traditional dancing and that too was another influence, it was his genius that out of these influences of the West and India, he discovered his own method of training suited to a modern dancer and choreographer, perfectly in tune with Indian needs and conditions.

The Uday Shankar India Culture Centre started on March 3, 1940 with 21 students in the first year. A five-year course was planned which included technique of dance, folk dance, improvisation, composition and rhythm, production, lighting, stage and costume design and make-up. The courses conducted by Uday Shankar included in the first year were, elementary physical exercises; expressive movements; development of sensitiveness of the body; improvisation - concentration - imagination; group feeling and observation; in the second and third year, development of the foregoing in a constructive form; knowledge of space and the psychology of movements; sense of colour and line, and relation of dance to drama. The fourth year included the development of creative power; characterisation and elementary make-up; and in the fifth year, composition; dance direction; costumes; make-up and stage lighting. The classes which were taken by other teachers were music, theory, *Kathakali*, *Bharata Natyam* and *Manipuri*.

Uday Shankar, popularly known as Dada used to take three classes everyday which were called General, Technique and Improvisation. The General class was the first period which used to start at 8 A.M. This was attended by all the members and classes together. He used to ask everyone to walk in simple rhythm, broken up from time to time with fast, slow and very slow tempo. Through these exercises he helped his students to discover the

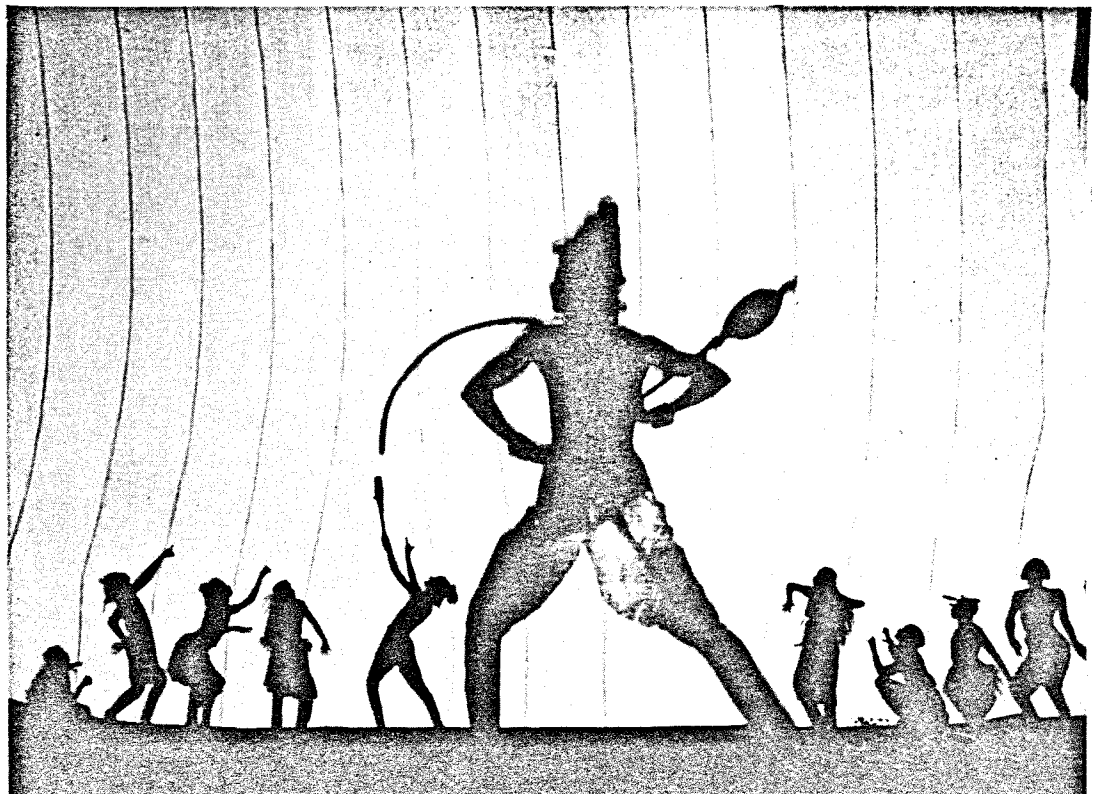


Shankar as "Shiva"





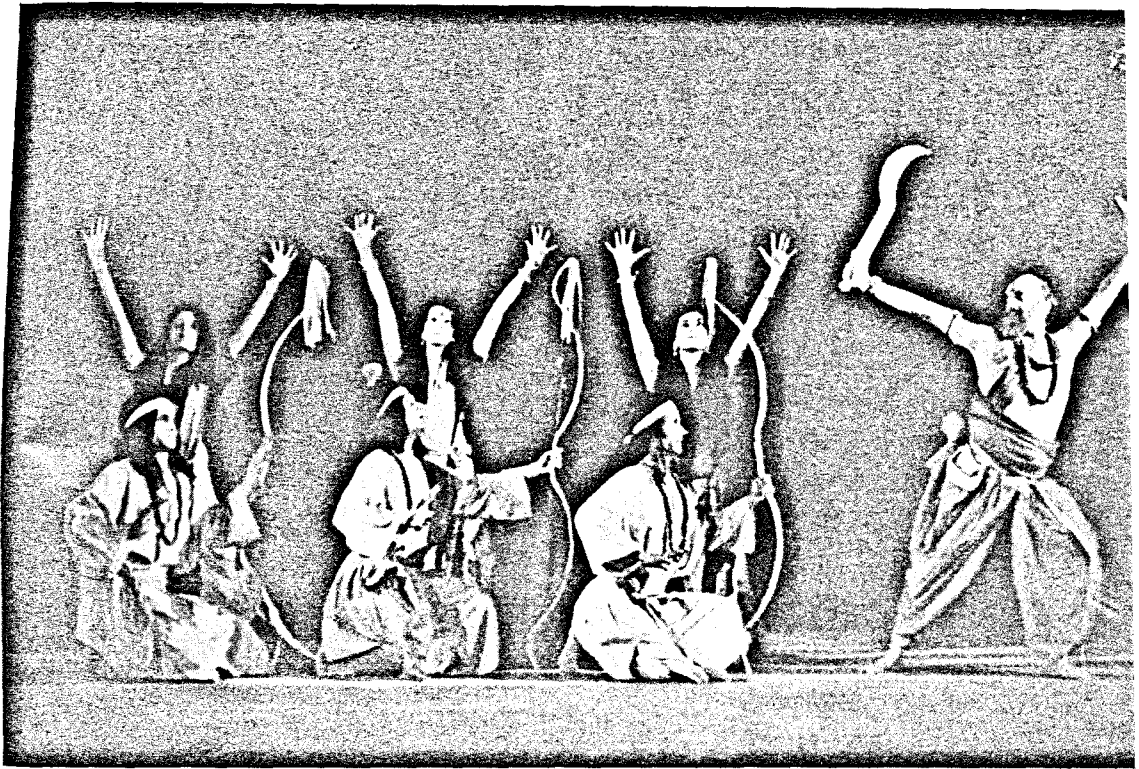
Shankar conducting a rehearsal. Below: Shadow-play "Ramayan".



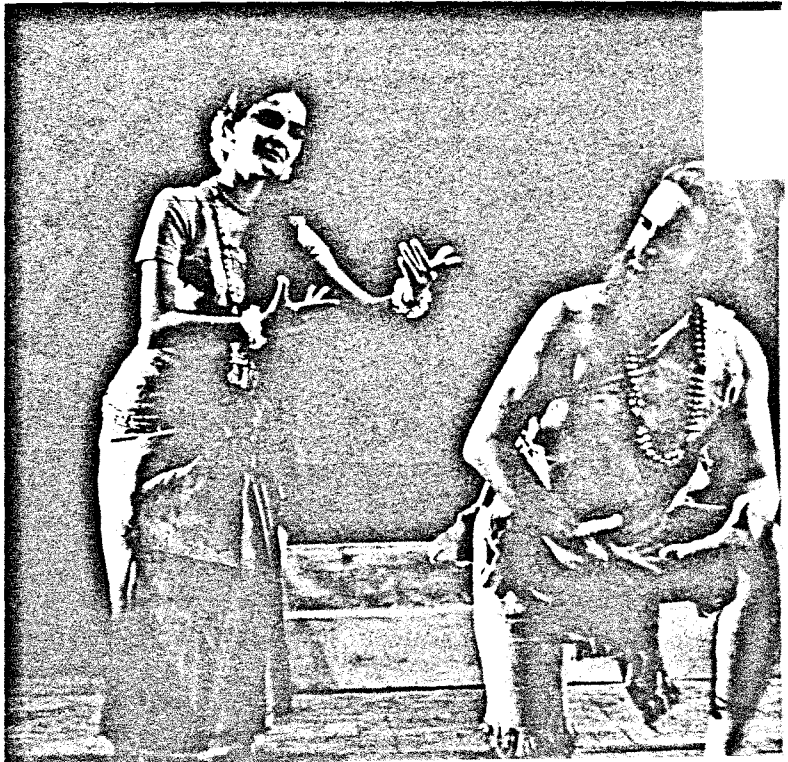


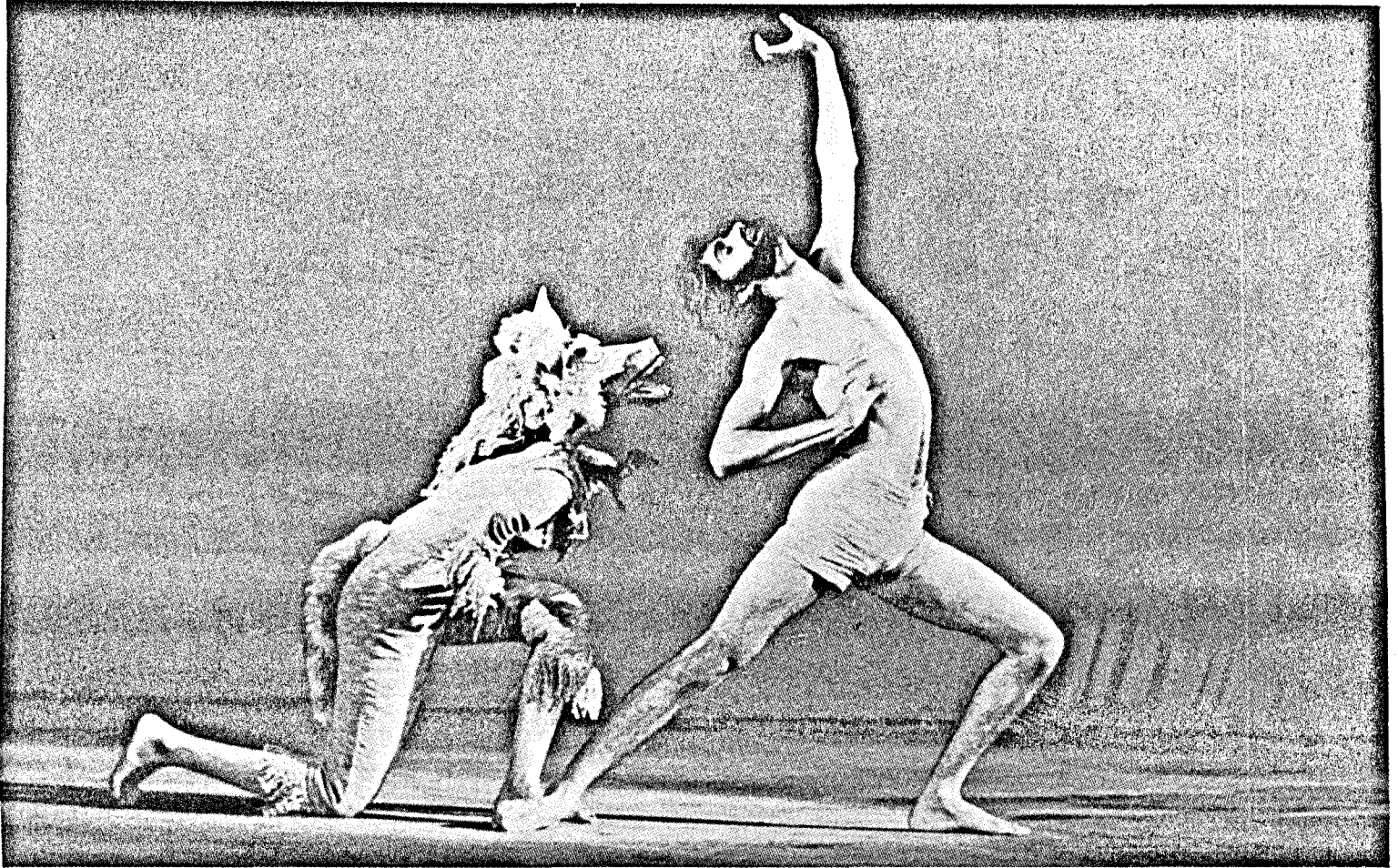
Above: At Almora, in the '40's. "Exorcism", K.K. Sethi and Narendra Sharma. Kameshwar Szgal (drummer). Below: "Divine Musicians", Narendra Sharma (front, L to R) Sachin Shankar Sardar Mohd., Anand Sarup, Choreography Uday Shankar.





New Delhi, in the '70's' Bhoomika's production of "Kaimani", Narendra Sharma as Manu. Right: with Kumkum Mathur as Shraddha in 'Kaimani'. Choreography Narendra Sharma.





“Wolf-boy”, Bharat, Narendra Sharma’s son as the Wolf-boy and Indira Krishan as the Motherwolf. (Photographs Narendra Sharma).

balance of walk created by continuous opposite hand movements, which were natural. Though we walk all the time, to walk consciously with perfect balance became difficult. Dada believed that to know the right movement, one should be capable of doing the wrong movement too, and therefore classes were taken for wrong movement in order to clearly discover the right one. Problems were given by doubling the hand movements with single steps and vice versa. Then came the basic rhythm with clapping and walking combined. This could be clap with step, in between, double, or redouble of the step. Variety of walks with stretched, round and straight arms and leg movements gave a new dimension to walk.

Then came the study of characteristic walks. The aim was that students should find out and discover a new range of movement emerging out of the simple walk. To make one aware of the body Dada created innumerable exercises. The exercises belonging to each zone of the body, part, limb, joints which could be then used separate or combined. Sometimes combinations were extremely complex. Through this process he made his students aware of the potentialities and limitations of each part of the human body. In his technique class, he taught some unusual steps which were his own creation. These movements perfected by the body were executed in group patterns and to make a design on the floor. Sometimes it was revealed that a particular movement was suitable to certain group-patterns but was out of tune with others. This was a class to grasp the basics of group-choreography.

The cream of his training was in the Improvisation class which was always the last class late in the evening. Everyday Dada would come with a subject and ask his students to improvise on it. Sometimes the improvisations were conditioned with restrictions: for example a step was given which would be continuous but the body, hand and head movement could go on changing. The subject for Improvisation class had a wide range which included stories, characters, moods, actual facts during the day, a given musical piece, abstract ideas etc. Dada would ask his students to sit in a semi-circle and sit himself in the centre. The orchestra of his troupe was always available for the class everyday. Musicians were asked to improvise the music then and there as the situation and subject demanded. This was the only class where the Centre orchestra with professional musicians was available. The class was always fresh and here Dada brought out the best from his students creatively. From time to time he took painting classes also.

To teach classical techniques Uday Shankar brought the best available teachers and gurus in those days to the Centre. Music was taught by Ustad Allaaddin Khan and Shri Vishnudass Shirali who in addition to this, trained regularly his professional orchestra. *Kathakali* was taken by Guru Shankaran Namboodri, *Bharatanatyam* by Guru Kandappan Pillai who had been also the Guru of Balasaraswati, *Manipuri* by Guru Amobi Singh. There were also lectures on psychology by Prof. G.N. Mathrain who came all the way from

Karachi to join the Centre. One Dr. Lal gave lectures on anatomy. Devi Lal Samar taught folk dances of the Bhils of Rajasthan. A Japanese dancer who visited the place taught Japanese dance.

Dada had a wonderful collection of films of the dances of Bali which were exhibited from time to time. The idea of teaching classical dance which Dada wanted his students to learn in its purest form was to increase the movement-vocabulary in their creative work. Later some of the students took to a Classical form for specialization which he encouraged. Hence there was a perfect blending of modernity and tradition. Uday Shankar had a great respect for the gurus and they on their part had the same towards him. Each one contributed his best. *Ramleela*, shadow play was an important project each year and was presented on a massive stage during Dussera in which all the members of the Centre took part.

In addition to these classes and projects, there was yet another significant activity to keep a watch on the progress of students and that was to present items choreographed by the students themselves. Here their progress in choreography was constantly examined and critically assessed. Some choreographers who showed talent in these performances became the country's leading choreographers later on. Through his new training system Uday Shankar enriched himself also as a choreographer. His choreography moved from traditional themes such as that of *Shiva-Tandava* to contemporary ones like *Labour and Machinery*, and *Rhythm of Life*.

Uday Shankar is now part of history. His work in Almora has a special place in our cultural heritage. Here he perfected his style and started the Indian 'Ballet' movement. Normally, the new style and form he initiated would have died out in these last forty or fifty years, but because it was based on fundamental needs of the art of dance it has continued and spread.

The coming generations of new choreographers will need to do more research on Uday Shankar and his teaching methods to discover the unique points in his experiments to guide them in their work so that they can continue to enrich Indian dance.

NARENDRA SHARMA, one of the leading choreographers. Teaches dance at Modern School, New Delhi, and is Director of Bhoomika, a cultural organisation.